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Kristensen, Mette Lund; Lemmergaard, Jeanette

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# The Counterproductive Effects of Role-Conflict Management

## The Challenges Facing Managers in Transitions to Stigmatized Roles

Mette Lund Kristensen & Jeanette Lemmergaard

### Abstract

This article analyzes how a manager's transition to a stigmatized role triggered a vicious circle of negative causalities in which transition strategies designed to help her cope with role strain had counterproductive effects. Based on role-identity and role-transition theory and evidence from a single case study, the article depicts how a required situational shift from distributive to authoritative management caused a self-reinforcing circular process in which attempts to cope with the transition through separation strategies triggered and aggravated the role conflict. Paradoxically, the separation efforts became a constant reminder of the role conflict and role ambiguity. We suggest that a more balanced evaluation of management styles can lessen the psychological burden that might occasionally develop in the undertaking of stigmatized roles, and also prevent counterproductive role-transition work.

### 1. Introduction

In general, individuals define and perceive themselves not just as individuals, but more importantly as belonging to social categories (Hall, 2004; Jenkins, 2006; Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987), for example being a distributive manager or an autonomous subordinate. Accordingly, role-behaviour patterns are construed on the basis of others' expectations of how an individual should act in a given role, and on the individual's own perceptions of how to act in given positions (Ashforth, 2001; Callero, 1985, McCall & Simmons, 1978; Robbins et al., 2010). Fundamentally, individuals perform institutionalized identity-role categories to nurture their sense of security and self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 1990), but sometimes role occupancies involve conflict, tensions, strain, dilemmas and divergence (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1991; Hicks, 2008; Lois, 2006; Settles et al., 2002). This article adds to this line of research.

Building on the literature on role identity and role transition, this article discusses the role-identity challenges experienced by a manager in the transition between two competing managerial roles, i.e. distributive and authoritative management. The case study describes the within-person role ambiguities that such a transition entails. In this respect, the article responds to a request from Paulsen et al. (2005) for more research on the degree of overlap, congruence or conflict between competing role identities. The study relates to work exploring challenges in leadership role changes (Nielsen & Daniels, 2012), psychological investments in stigmatized tasks (Baran et al., 2012), emotional distress resulting from not meeting ideal work-situation preferences (Holmes et al., 2012), and studies of within-person emotional and cognitive challenges (Ouweneel et al., 2012; Xanthopoulou, 2012). The study shows how role-transition management strategies can have counterproductive effects on role-identity ambiguities and inner conflicts when an individual is required to take upon herself a negatively valued role identity.

## **2. Role-conflict and transition management**

Research suggests that role conflicts can take several forms based on competing demands which are generated structurally, socially or individually (Hicks, 2008; Louis & Sutton, 1991; Sundt & Cullen, 1998, 2002). Being both institutionalized and idiosyncratically constructed (Nippert-Eng, 1996), the very nature of role identity can lead to conflicts between one's self-perception as a subject and one's assumption of other people's perception of oneself (Knights & Willmott, 1989). Role boundaries are important demarcations of who we are and who we are not. The individual's sense of self, security and dignity is tied to these boundary distinctions (Epstein, 1989). Humans seem to be uncomfortable with what is not reconciled or incompatible. Thus they enact roles and boundaries to create consistency and fall in line with role behaviours and perceptions. Therefore, in micro-transitions (Ashforth, 2001) the creation and maintenance of role boundaries (Nippert-Eng, 1996b) is a critical aspect of role-transition management. Role conflicts seem to be particularly strong when role perceptions and role expectations are in disaccord with the behaviours actually exhibited (Ashforth, 2001).

Role multiplicity is another cause of role conflict. Individuals occupy multiple roles in their professional and private lives, and make daily role transitions that are not even registered. Yet when individuals occupy a role that they themselves or others disapprove of, they experience role conflict. Ashforth (2001) distinguishes between roles with situational relevance and roles with subjective importance. Situational relevance refers to the degree to which a given identity is socially appropriate in a given situation and whether it is considered by others to be legitimately applicable to the situation, and subjective importance refers to the role identity that is preferred by the individual and the social community (Ashforth, 2001). The magnitude of the role tran-

sition is an indicator of the potential for such role conflict: the greater the distance between roles and the greater the disapproval, the higher the level of potential role conflict. Rosenberg (1981) showed how the magnitude of a salient role had individual-level consequences with regard to self-definition and self-evaluation. The larger the magnitude of the transition, the more demanding the boundary work will be. Therefore, by serving to demarcate and strengthen a consistent self-understanding, role boundaries may in some situations work as an obstacle during role entry and exit.

In the literature, scholars use metaphors like »crossing an abyss« (Durkheim, 1915), »taking a cognitive leap« (Zerubavel, 1991), breaking through a »mental fence« (Zerubavel, 1991), »switching cognitive gears« (Louis & Sutton, 1991) and »surmounting boundaries« (Ashforth et al., 2000) to describe the challenges of role transitions. Such metaphors provide an imagery of obstacles, hindrances and problems in transitions and emphasize the extensive cognitive and mental work that is required to shift roles. A central feature in crossing boundaries and facilitating role transition is the signalling of the movement from one role to the other through »rites of passage« (Van Gennep, 1960) or »transition bridges« (Ashforth, 2001). Such signalling is expected to minimize personal distress and organizational and structural role disruptions, and facilitate the fulfilment of the individual's psychological desires for identity, meaning, control and belonging (Ashforth, 2001). Ashforth et al. (2000) developed a model of the role-transition process. They proposed that role exit is realized through rites of separation and that rites of incorporation facilitate role entry. Separation strategies aim to distance the individual from a role through intensive cognitive and behavioural work, whereas incorporation strategies aim at establishing a more equilibrated and harmonious self-perception for the individual by justifying the emotional investment in the entered role as well as the role's ideological framework. Researchers have suggested separation strategies such as compartmentalization, reframing, deflection and abandonment of roles as primary methods to decrease feelings of role strain (Becker & Geer, 1958; Haas & Shaffir, 1984; Smith-Lovin, 2007; Stryker, 1980; Thompson, 1991). However, according to Ashforth et al.'s (2000) model, these strategies have primarily been concerned with separation as a role *exit* strategy.

Based on empirical findings, this article investigates role-transition strategies used in the transition to a socially stigmatized role.

### 3. Case study

This article studies the role-identity challenges that a middle manager experienced during a transition from a distributive role to an authoritative in a medium-sized Danish financial institution. During the late 1990s this financial institution successfully created a unique work environment based on distributive management for which it

had gained international recognition. A range of initiatives was launched to support distributive management: a recruitment process focusing on selecting candidates who were aligned with corporate values; programmes for training self-management skills; normative disciplining of behaviours; a flat hierarchical structure; and a thorough integration of trust as a core value. The specific transition that this study focuses on took place in 2009 with the initiation of a project that would ultimately influence the working procedures of the entire organization. The middle manager in charge of leading the project was highly experienced and had successfully followed self-managing principles in other projects. Accordingly, her natural and legitimate point of departure in the new project was to stimulate commitment among subordinates across the organization. This was a difficult task because the project was not part of the core business and therefore was not automatically granted top priority among her subordinates. The manager repeatedly experienced that her subordinates did not attend meetings, respond to written requests or keep deadlines concerning the new project. When confronted with this obstructive behaviour, they would refer to time pressure and the fact that the project was not part of the organization's core business. This led to frustration, as the manager was left with no way to regulate undesired behaviours through reprisals because of the distributive ideology. The manager's authority was limited to an appeal to the subordinates' goodwill to be supportive, participative and interested in the project. Further, the project implementation was subject to external stakeholders' demands and internal executives' expectations of the project's completion. Accordingly, the manager saw it as her last resort to undertake a more authoritative manager role, including increased manager initiative, involvement, planning, delegation, responsibility and control. Consequently, she changed her communication style. Whereas core business tasks were managed through dialogue-based communication, tasks related to the new project were primarily based on one-way written communication. Despite the situational relevance of the authoritative role, the manager was hesitant and doubtful about how this would be received in the highly self-managing environment. She questioned her scope of authority and raised existential questions such as »Who am I as a leader?« Her confusion was profound and touched on questions relating to basic assumptions and deeply felt values. As a result, the role ambiguity experienced by the manager in the transition from distributive to authoritative management emerged as an object of study.

### *3.1. Circumstantial attributes of the transition*

The shift between distributive and authoritative management has five circumstantial attributes, signifying a situation with great potential for transition difficulties and role conflict.

First, the two roles are *competitive* (Ashforth, 2001). The manager had to engage in precisely those manager ideals of control and command against which she defined herself. Competitive states increase the distinctiveness of the competitive roles and the potential for conflict in the transition (Ashforth, 2001; Louis, 1980).

Second, the transition involved an *intra-role* transition (Louis, 1980). Even though the authoritative role was only temporary, the negotiation and legitimization of that role severely challenged the manager's perception of herself as a distributive manager and her basic assumptions about good leadership. This within-person cognitive and emotional work (Hicks, 2008) could only be done by the manager herself. Hence the focus was on what Ashforth (2001) labels micro-role transitions, which concern the psychological transition a person undertakes during a role transition, as opposed to macro-role transitions exploring the conflicts in the transition between roles.

A third attribute concerns the switch between a *permanent* distributive role and a *temporary* authoritative role. The authoritative behaviours were enacted in parallel with the everyday distributive management activities as isolated impacts of command. The separation from ordinary practice and core business activities enhanced the subordinates' tendency to overhear authoritative orders. The literature indicates that individuals invest less in temporary roles than in permanent roles, and that temporary roles have less impact on other simultaneously held roles (Ashforth, 2001).

A fourth attribute concerns the appropriateness of the roles in terms of their *situational relevance* or *subjective importance* (cf. above). It is well known from social categorization theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1990) that individuals tend to link up with social categories which enhance their self-esteem and are socially validated, and that other people's evaluation of our actions affect our preferences (Mead, 1934). But as described above, the situation demanded that she assumed a role that went against her own and the entire organization's management orientation and challenged her deeply felt values and basic assumptions about good leadership.

The stigmatization of authoritative management implied a transition from a role of *positive valence* (i.e., the distributive role) to a role of *negative valence* (i.e., the authoritative role) (Ashforth, 2001). This fifth attribute therefore increased the social and psychological magnitude of the transition.

These five circumstantial attributes had severe effects on the manager's self-perception and ultimately on her manager role identity, and created the conditions for role conflict and role ambiguity. The negative effects of the attributes on the manager's role handling and transition management are described in the case analysis below.

However, before going into the analytical details, we shall account for the data-collection process.

### *3.2. Data collection*

Longitudinal data was collected throughout the project implementation, from 2009 to 2012. Data was gathered through informal personal conversations and open-ended interviews ranging from 30 minutes to approximately three hours, allowing for a thorough description of the manager's feelings and psychological ambivalences (Brown & Humphreys, 2003; Silverman, 1993). Notes were written after each conversation and interview (Hayano, 1982). The face-to-face meetings were supplemented with observations of the manager's interactions with her subordinates as well as with her executive managers. The overall purpose was to gather knowledge of, for example, feelings, reactions, sense-making and the effects of the role transition (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). It is primarily the unique access to the manager's emotional and personal challenges and considerations and her very honest responses that lend value to this particular case study. This openness and insight into psychological concerns were considered more important than the number of cases and respondents (Johnson, 1983; Watson, 2008). Following Alvesson's (2011) suggestions of using metaphors in interviews, it was clear that identity work was a prevalent metaphor in the conversations. First, the researcher's identity changed from being a researcher concerned with the project implementation to being a personal sounding board for the manager. This altered identity categorization had a positive effect on the richness of data because it gave the manager an incentive to be open and honest, since she could benefit personally from the sessions. Moreover, the manager used the interview situations to do role-identity work. Her inner dialogues about inconsistencies and ambiguities concerning the competing roles were overtly expressed and gave the researcher a unique insight into the intra-personal identity negotiation and conflicts.

## **4. Case analysis**

The analytical process of this study was inspired by Ashcraft's (1999) iterative and inductive approach to data analysis. The circumstantial attributes in this case produced role conflict and role ambiguity. The competitiveness of the roles, the intra-role characteristics, the temporary state, the situational relevance, and the negative valence of authoritative management led us to pay special attention to the manager's role-transition management, especially her strategies for coping with role conflict.

### *4.1. Role-transition strategies*

In line with the role-transition model developed by Ashforth et al. (2000), it was legitimate to expect that the manager would cope with the entered authoritative role via incorporation strategies, but empirical evidence challenged the model. Instead of

incorporating the authoritative ideology during role entry, the manager clearly distanced and separated herself from the authoritative role upon entry. This evidence challenges role-transition theories which suggest that rites of separation are primarily applied during role exit in order to re-programme the individual's perception of him- or herself and prepare for a new role entry. The manager made extensive use of the following separation strategies to handle role conflict and role ambiguity upon and after entering the authoritative role: blaming and reframing, abandoning and taking charge, and communicative distancing.

#### 4.1.1. *Blaming and reframing*

The manager cognitively processed her ambiguous role situation in conversations with the researcher in order to legitimize the authoritative role to herself. By referring to external causes such as the lack of employee commitment, the fast-approaching project deadline, the external stakeholders' demands for completing the project and the board of directors' expectations, she sought justification for her authoritative behaviours. She described these causes as being out of her hands and convinced herself that she could not be held accountable for her authoritative role. She found comfort in »blaming« circumstances over which she had no influence and could only comply with. Thereby she disclaimed responsibility for the authoritative role. Through exterior blaming, she was able to cope in a rational way, which helped her convince herself of the inevitability and legitimacy of the authoritative role. She reframed the situation as a »no-choice« and »not-to-be-blamed« situation and her authoritative behaviour as a *necessity* and a *demand*, not a personal choice. Thus she distanced herself from authorship and ownership of the authoritative role. Thompson (1991) found that reframing is often an appropriate strategy when a transition is difficult, for instance when there is a strong emotional, cognitive or behavioural investment in one role, or when one role has been held for a long time. In such cases people tend to reframe the meaning of a devaluated or stigmatized role in order to feel more positive about it.

#### 4.1.2. *Abandoning and taking charge*

The manager was concerned about the aftermath of the project implementation and her future collaboration with her subordinates. She briefly considered abandoning the entire project, thereby evading any requirements of authoritative behaviours. Due to the executive board's and external stakeholders' vigilant attention to the project, it was not an appropriate option to abandon the project in its entirety. Instead, she ended up abandoning parts of the project and taking charge of significant other parts. In this way, the number of authoritative episodes was reduced and their salience minimized. However, this meant that she spent a lot of time carrying out the subordinates' project tasks and implementing instead of coordinating and leading the project. The



time she spent avoiding the authoritative role exceeded the amount of time she spent acting authoritatively.

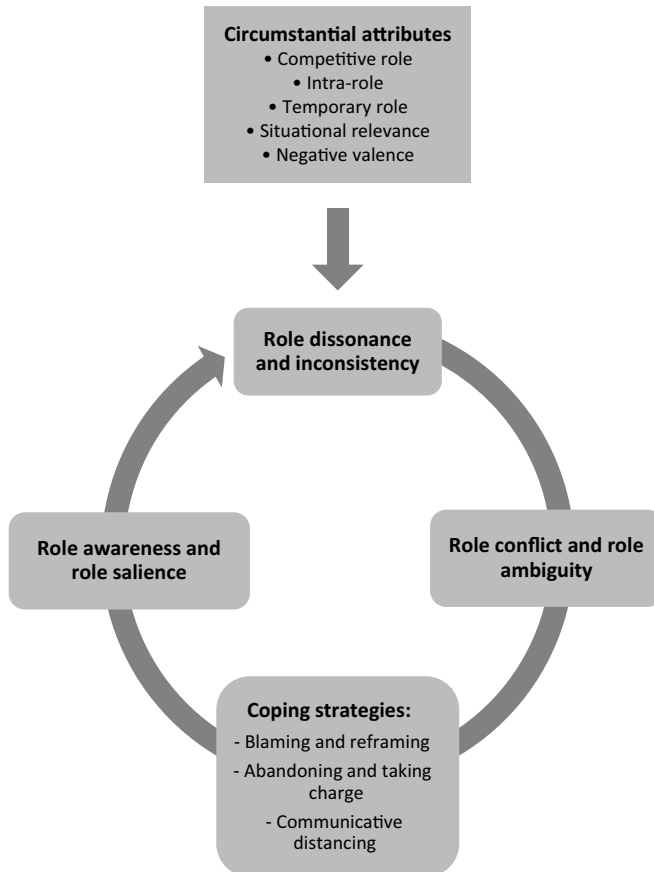
#### *4.1.3. Communicative distancing*

There was a clear change of communication style in the role transition. The previous open face-to-face dialogue and symmetrical communication relations, which had been crucial criteria for successful distributive management, were replaced with written information and asymmetrical communication relations. Whenever the manager had to control or direct, she turned to writing emails, thereby creating a distance between her and her subordinates. This change of communication style marked a clear distinction between the roles, and unintentionally increased her own and her subordinates' consciousness of the authoritative role because of its physical presence in the form of written orders.

#### *4.2. Counterproductive consequences of transition strategies*

The cognitive labour that the manager put into assuming the authoritative role while simultaneously trying to separate herself from it did not resolve the role conflict and ambiguity. The transition's circumstantial attributes triggered a vicious circle of counterproductive causalities that the separation strategies were not able to mitigate. Rather, the attempts to cope with inconsistency, conflict and ambiguity turned out to be counterproductive to their purpose. Figure 1 illustrates how a set of circumstantial role-transition attributes trigger a vicious circle of counter-productivity whereby attempts to manage role conflict and ambiguity increase the awareness and salience of the stigmatized role, thereby confirming and strengthening the negative feelings of role dissonance and inconsistency.

Given the competitive nature of her roles, her orientation towards distributive management and the subsequent negative valence of the authoritative role, the manager felt a strong cognitive dissonance between her authoritative behaviour and her ideological role orientation. The manager had a hard time legitimizing the role transition to herself, which caused inner conflict and emotional distress. The separation strategies decreased her feelings of cognitive dissonance and role ambiguity at first, but eventually her struggle to separate from control-and-command behaviours and tone it down vis-à-vis the subordinates made her more aware of the authoritative role. The negative atmosphere surrounding the authoritative role caused the manager to intensify her cognitive work on the authoritative role and ask, »How can I act authoritatively without being authoritative?« In other words, »How can I perform a role without making it obvious?« Paradoxically, the strategic separation work shed light on the irreconcilable nature of the two roles, marked out the boundaries and increased the manager's awareness of the role dissonance. The repair work reminded her of the

**Figure 1. A vicious circle of counterproductive causalities**

negative valence of the entered role and of the competing and conflicting properties of the two roles. Separation intensified the struggle with the negative perception of the authoritative role and renewed the feeling of role-identity dissonance.

Despite the manager's cognitive attempts to counterbalance negative role feelings and effects with separation strategies, the very application of these strategies paradoxically increased the awareness and salience of the negative role narrative. Hence, the amount of psychological energy spent *processing* the entry into the authoritative role by separating from it exceeded the time spent actually *performing* authoritatively to others. The result was that the authoritative role was far more salient to the manager herself than it was to others.

These findings support the conclusions in role-identity research that the magnitude and importance of a role identity to an individual is apparent from the salience it is given by the role occupant (Callero, 1985). By using separation strategies the manager minimized the external salience of the authoritative role; paradoxically, however, this made her even more aware of it and caused a within-person role struggle. Thus this case study challenges theories suggesting that the most salient (Stryker, 1980) or prominent (McCall & Simmons, 1978) role identities are positioned at the top of the hierarchy of role identities, and that the hierarchical structuring of salience is influenced by the role's importance to the individuals and to their social relations (Callero, 1985). In the case study, the least preferred role became the most salient to the person.

All in all, the role-transition management evolved into a vicious circle of counterproductive causalities, where the manager's struggle to handle role ambiguity paradoxically aggravated the situation.

## 5. Conclusion and implications

This article challenges research suggesting that the demarcation of role boundaries improves and preserves the individual's sense of self and security (Epstein, 1989) and that transition-management strategies like separation mitigate cognitive and psychological distress during role transitions. The article illustrates how actual efforts to resolve role conflict and ambiguity can result in a counterproductive and paradoxical worsening of role distress and ultimately obstruct a productive role transition and role performance. Based on our empirical evidence, we argue that in transitions from a socially approved to a socially stigmatized role, rites of passage risk aggravating role conflict, because they become constant reminders of the role dissonance. More specifically, our findings indicate that the use of separation as a strategy to cope with role conflict and ambiguity can become paradoxically counterproductive and increase the very same distress that it was supposed to ease. The cure becomes the illness.

The circumstantial attributes of the role transition were the main contributors to these negative causalities. The negative valence of the entered role and the situational requirement to make the unwanted role entry especially contributed to the counterproductive effects. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to ease role distress through transition-management strategies. Accordingly, the separation strategy produced a vicious circle of negative causalities, because the very act of separating increased the awareness and salience of the negatively valuated role and drew disproportionate attention to barriers and obstacles between the roles. A self-reinforcing circular process therefore evolved whereby strategies to cope with role strain simultaneously mitigated and enhanced role conflict. This series of negative causalities leads us to conclude that when an individual is required to undertake a stigmatized role that is in conflict with

the social and individual preferences and ideological orientation, there is a risk that the application of transition management strategies will have counterproductive effects.

The empirical findings suggest implications for practitioners working with distributive management styles. The widespread articulation and establishment of the superiority of participative and distributive management styles may hinder successful transitions to a more authoritative management style – which may be required occasionally. Therefore, we find it important to highlight the vulnerability of a one-sided celebration or a stigmatization of specific management styles. Without a multifaceted and pluralistic perception and practice, the manager's latitude is severely restricted and his or her opportunities to be intuitive and adjust to situational requirements are limited. Thus this article contributes to an understanding of the complexity and ambiguities inherent in the practice of leadership.

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